

## LUCRETIUS ON DEATH.

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**F**OR the modern intellectual any serious preoccupation with death is out of the question. If he takes life seriously, he is too much engrossed in his work to think of death; if he takes life lightly, he cannot give up his play for such sombre reflection.

“My candle burns at both ends  
It will not last the night.  
But ah my foes, and oh my friends,  
It gives a lovely light.”

Absorbing interest in the very process of living has thus brought it about, for better or for worse, that the modern sophisticated man lives straight up to the hour as if he meant to go on living forever. Such busy mortals count into their plans only those who arrange for conferences beforehand and then come at the appointed time: death is notoriously irregular about his engagements with men. Come he will, of course, and have his way he must; but for them sufficient unto his coming is the hour thereof.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the majority of men in our day are not sophisticated intellectuals, and have not achieved this fine unconcern regarding death. The fear of death is a very real factor in the lives of multitudes of men and women to-day. No religion has yet succeeded in robbing death of its terrors. The most that any religion has done is to make these terrors less by emphasizing the great compensations that await the faithful after death. But to get the rewards one must remain faithful *unto* death. Even our own religion, as often interpreted, has traditionally left enough doubt regarding one's personal salvation to make death dreadful; for since no sin can enter into heaven and since even the righteous confessedly sin (in thought at least) every day, even the saint, if

he drop off unawares, might wake up in hell because he did not have time to make peace with God over his latest transgression. This logic, strictly true to much Christian thought, has traditionally been so softened by notions of divine goodness as to make the good Christian *fairly* certain of what the "heathen" Socrates felt no doubt at all—"that no harm can come to a good man, living or dead." So long as men seek after an other-wordly salvation, undoubted reassurance can come only through such a belief in the goodness of God as guarantees universal redemption. If one cannot rise to this faith, then must he go on fearing death, or find some other solvent for his fear.

Fifty years before Jesus was born there died a philosophic Roman poet who made available other solvents for this universal fear. His name was Lucretius. He was not a great philosopher, nor even a great poet. But he had keen insight into the hopes and fears of men. Hearing priests of the occult intimidate men, seeing mortals on every hand cringe before the inevitable event, and being himself convinced that it was a great mistake to rob life of what meaning it did have by shrinking from what was thought to come after it,—Lucretius set about to enrich life by robbing death of its terror. Where fears existed, he thought it better to meet them in the open and have it out with them. For those whose faith in future rewards has declined more rapidly than their fear of avenging agencies after death—fear of the gods, strangely enough, often outlives any vital belief in their existence—the quaint but sincere logic of Lucretius will be of interest, even though its universal gospel is one of salvation *in* the grave.

*While we are, death is not: when death is, we are not.* In this terse dilemma is summed up the rationale of death which brought such comfort to Lucretius, and in which he hoped other men also might find solace. He saw that human life was sometimes unhappy because men lived incessantly under a fear of death. This fear he thought to proceed from the belief that beyond death, the gods waited to punish some men in terrible ways, or, perchance, all men in milder ways. In his philosophic mission, therefore, of making men happy, a very evident duty which devolved upon him was in some way to unshackle men from the bondage of this fear. In addition to universal salvation—a solution which Christianity made possible and toward which it has gravitated—there is, theoretically, more than one other way to envisage death as a happy ending. One may deny the existence of gods; or, admitting their existence, he

may hold that they have no concern with man here or hereafter; or, again, he may deny that the soul persists beyond death either for reward or for punishment.

Lucretius, though seeming to admit the existence of gods—some critics to the contrary however—maintains that they are not at all interested in the conduct or the welfare of men. "For," said he, "the nature of gods must ever in itself of necessity enjoy immortality with supreme repose, far removed and withdrawn from our concerns; since exempt from every pain, exempt from all dangers, strong in its own resources, not wanting aught of us, it is neither gained by favors nor moved by anger." Again he holds that "If you well apprehend and keep in mind these things, nature free at once and rid of her haughty lords is seen to do all things spontaneously without the meddling of the gods."

Attributing, therefore, to nature the ability and the predilection to create us and all things which we know without "the meddling of the gods," Lucretius prepares a strong reinforcement for his doctrine of death by a development of the materialistic dogma that we do not in soul or body persist beyond death. He grounded this contention in the doctrine which Democritus had elaborated, and which his more immediate master, Epicurus, had further affirmed, the doctrine of atoms. The special phase of this doctrine which pertains to another life is that the mind and soul are formed of the same substance which constitutes the body; and that, therefore, they are coeval. He did not, indeed, claim that the substance of the soul is identical with that of the body; but the significant fact of his belief upon this point is that the fabric from which both, as it were, are woven, is matter. The soul is made of much finer and smoother atoms, to be sure, and is, therefore, much quicker in its motions, "as the rapidity of the thinking process demonstrates." Still both body and soul are spontaneous products of nature from matter which differs, not in kind, but only in quality; and the dissolution of the two means the death of the self. In this way, he made it doubly sure that, if the gods were disposed to punish men eternally, which he denied, they would be disappointed by seeing their intended victims vanish as effectually as did the airy witches before the wondering stare of Banquo and Macbeth. With this twofold blow, Lucretius thought to strike down this nightmare of the human imagination; and make it possible for cowering men to rise up and live fearlessly while they did live.

Lucretius did not believe that the constituent matter either of soul or of body is destroyed at death. He regarded death as being only the separation of soul-atoms and body-atoms. But he considered the individual to be neither the soul nor the body, but the resultant of their union. And so he reasoned that, even though "the nature of the mind and the power of the soul do feel, after they have been severed from our body, yet that is nothing to us who by the binding tie of marriage between body and soul are formed each into one single being." He continues further by way of illustrating this thought: "And just as in time gone by we felt no distress, when the Carthaginians came together from all sides to do battle and all things shaken by war's troublous uproar shuddered and quaked beneath high heaven, and mortal men were in doubt which of the two peoples it should be to whose empire all must fall by sea and land alike, thus when we shall be no more, when there shall have been a separation of body and soul, out of both of which we are each formed into a single being, to us, you may be sure, who then shall be no more, nothing whatever can happen to excite sensation, not if earth shall be mingled with sea, and sea with heaven."

But to make assurance doubly sure, he further analyzed the problem, and precluded the only possibility for lingering doubt regarding the state beyond death. By the doctrine of cycles, which was commonly held in his day, especially in Stoic circles, there was a possibility—a certainty as some believed—that, in a future age, the atoms which formed an individual's body would be arranged again to form a human body exactly like the former one; and that even the finer atoms of the soul would be called again to form its soul. In other words, the doctrine taught that an individual, after one complete dissolution, might exist again and again in the eternally recurring cycles of nature. What, then, if the gods should wreak vengeance upon him when he came to be himself a second time?

In considering this possibility, Lucretius assumed that, if man were to exist again in the future, he had already existed in the past. "Can lines finite one way be infinite another?" Continuing upon this hypothesis, he reasoned that, "if time should gather up our matter after our death and put it once more into the position in which it now is, and the light of life be given to us again, this result even would concern us not at all, when the chain of our self-consciousness has once been snapped asunder. So now we give ourselves no

concern about any self which we have been before, nor do we feel any distress on the score of that self. . . . We cannot recovery this in memory: a break in our existence has been interposed, and all the motions have wandered to and fro far astray from the sensations they produced. For he whom evil is to befall, must in his person exist at the very time it comes, if the misery and suffering are haply to have any place at all; but since death precludes this, and forbids him to be, upon whom the ills can be brought, you may be sure we have nothing to fear after death, and that he who exists not, cannot become miserable, and that it matters not a whit whether he has been born into life at any other time, when immortal death has taken away his mortal life."

But it was not from fear of the gods alone that Lucretius meant his philosophy to free men. He sought also, with an almost Buddhist outlook, to combat a more intimate poison of human happiness. As one of his translators observes, "he argues that seated in man's very self is some source of restlessness, discontent and sorrow, by which life is still vitiated, even though all fear of hell and of the anger of the gods be done away with. Self, he says, is the secret malady of each of us—forever unsatisfied, forever ill at ease; and death alone can free us from this foe that is of our own household."

In a manner somewhat removed from the highways of current thought, Lucretius sought to enrich human life by freeing it from the shackles of tradition. The sincerity of his attempt cannot leave one unmoved, and the simplicity of his solution must challenge a modern reader to better the argument, even as human life has been immeasurably improved since Lucretius. In a fine spirit he hoped at a single blow to lay the two greatest enemies of humankind—fear of the gods and discontent with self. Secure alike from both his inner and his outer foes, man could then, with the gathering shadows, lie down in contentment after banking his fires for the eternal night.